

Source : <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/011389c>

Remarks at the Annual Dinner of the Knights of Malta in New York, New York

January 13, 1989

Your Eminences, Your Excellency, Your Most Eminent Highness, President Peter Grace, and ladies and gentlemen, tonight for me is a moment from humility: to stand here before you, the members of the most ancient order of its kind in the world, formed in the Holy Land 900 years ago -- or as some of us would say, only yesterday. [Laughter] But to stand in this way before the members of this order with its remarkable history, which speaks to the entire ebb and flow of Western civilization, and its noble present, which is a monument to the highest values of free men and women, is to be reminded once again that the only true calling of man is service to God, and to have served in that calling is cause not for pride but for gratitude.

Today, as for nine centuries, you, the Knights and Dames of Malta, serve the victims of poverty, hunger, and disease. I have often noted that in America we have a tradition that began when the first community of settlers joined together to help build a home for a newcomer: the tradition of

neighbor helping neighbor, the tradition of the barn-raising and the settlement house and the church-run hospital, the tradition that Tocqueville spoke of in wonderment more than a century and a half ago when he observed that when there was a job to do Americans didn't wait for the government but pitched in and did it for themselves. Well, yes, an American tradition, but one more ancient and universal as well, of which history offers few examples more crystalline and enduring than the Knights of Malta.

Now, if I may tell you a story. You don't find this spirit of love and mercy everywhere -- which makes you appreciate it all the more when you do find it. When I was still fairly new in my former line of work, the movie business, I was cast to play opposite Errol Flynn in a picture called ``The Santa Fe Trail." The movie was really about John Brown, the abolitionist who led the famous raid on Harper's Ferry. Raymond Massey played John Brown, and he gave his character that perfect touch of insanity. Mike Curtiz directed, and I've always thought the studio picked the perfect man to direct a film about a madman. [Laughter]

To give you an idea of what I mean, we had reached the end of the picture, the scene in which they hang John Brown, when Mike flew into one of his rages. He was furious. He'd just discovered he couldn't actually hang Massey -- [laughter] -- and he'd have to use a dummy instead. [Laughter] Well, then he started moving around the actor who was playing the minister who stood by Brown on the scaffolding. He was setting up the shop -- or

the shot, looking through the camera viewfinder and motioning to the actor to move about -- first left, then right, finally back. And the poor fellow took one step too far back, fell 12 feet from the scaffold, and broke his leg.

[Laughter] Mike walked across, looked down where he lay on the ground, turned to his assistant, and said, ``Get me another minister." [Laughter] If only I could treat Congress that way. [Laughter]

But to return to faith, hope, and love, your work with the ill, in particular, those with leprosy, now those with AIDS; your partnership with Americans [Americares] and its president, Bob Macauley, to move medicine to those in need all over the world; your support of Mother Teresa's care for the poorest of the poor; your work feeding the hungry in Latin America -- these are some of the highest examples of love, compassion, and mercy in our time. They show the power of faith moving in the modern world.

I've heard a lot about this being the era of greed, usually from those who really mean that taxes are too low and government is too small. I wish these critics would explain how it is that in the past 8 years, during this supposed era of greed, charitable giving has risen to record highs in our nation -- last year, in cash alone, \$94.7 billion. And not too long ago, we found it's even higher than we thought. No one, it turned out, had ever fully added up what Americans give to their neighbors in need through their churches, synagogues, and other religious organizations. Some of this was

because of the difficulty of gathering the information, but I expect that it may also have reflected a secularist bias.

Whenever we've talked about the immensity of American giving, critics have been quick to retort, well, that much of it is through church congregations and that not much of that goes to the poor and the hungry. Now, a private organization called Independent Sector has added up what America's congregations actually do pass on -- not just conjecture about it. It found that the giving to the needy from those sources amounts to more than half of the national total. In other words, we already knew that private giving in America -- through corporations, foundations, and other easily seen bodies -- was the highest in the world, and now we know that this giving is only about a third of all American private givings to the needy. That sure doesn't sound like greed to me.

By the way, I suspect that a dollar that comes from our churches and synagogues goes farther to help those in need than one that comes from the Government. And I don't mean just because the Government's overhead is higher. No, it's that the state's power is, at its root, the power to coerce, for example, to demand taxes. The power of the church is the power of love. And that makes all the difference.

Why is it that in this city which spends so much on its social service bureaucracy so many young people find their refuge and salvation in Father Ritter's Covenant House? Could it be that there in the priests and

nuns and volunteers they see the face of love entering their lives for the first time? They aren't a case to be handled, which they would be if they were in the hands of the government agencies, but a soul to be cherished.

Twenty years ago the Government declared a war on poverty. Poverty won. Too many poor people were sucked into a system that declared that the only sin is not to have enough money. Soon, too many became dependent on government payments and lost the moral strength that has always given the poor the determination to climb America's ladder of opportunity. In my view, the great lesson of that experience is that no war on poverty stands a chance unless it rises above the secular state and is guided by the power of love that moves through God's word.

Now, I know that when the Knights talk of the power of love and of serving ``the least of these thy brethren" you also mean -- as I do -- protecting the unborn. Our critics call themselves prochoice. But have they ever stopped to think that the unborn never have a choice? When Roe versus Wade goes -- as I have faith it must -- the way of Dred Scott and ``separate but equal", a new debate will rise in the statehouses of our land. And the voice that I believe must be heard and, in the end, shall be heard over all the others is the voice of life. The Knights can be part of that voice. Can I count on you? [Applause]

In just 7 days I will lay down the mantle of this great office the American people have bestowed upon me. I won't leave the battle. As long as there is

breath in me, I will fight for the principles in which I believe. But if I may, in this moment of leaving office, make two special requests of you: The first is that you prepare now to be part of the voice of life in the great debate ahead, and the second, that you help America find a way out of the trap of the welfare state. Help it find a way to open the doors of hope and love -- open them as no state, any state, ever can -- for those in need. Help open the promises of this land of shining opportunity to all.

I believe now, as I always have, that America's strength is in "We the People." This great experiment in faith and freedom will rise or fall on the courage of "We the People." And you who have so willingly and ably taken up the burdens of freedom, through the Knights and throughout your lives, you who are surely part of what Jefferson called our natural aristocracy, you will surely be in the front as "We the People" turn to the dawn of America's tomorrows.

Thank you, and God bless you.

Note: The President spoke at 8:23 p.m. in the Grand Ballroom at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel. In his opening remarks, he referred to John Cardinal O'Connor, Archbishop of New York; James Cardinal Hickey, Archbishop of Washington, DC; Andrew Bertie, prince and grand master of the military order of the Knights of Malta; and J. Peter Grace, president of the

American Association of the Knights of Malta. Following his remarks, the President returned to Washington, DC. The remarks were released by the Office of the Press Secretary on January 14.